

The University of Chicago

THE RÔLE OF THE CHURCH IN
TRANS-MISSOURI

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF CHURCH HISTORY
1934

By
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THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN TRANS-MISSOURI

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Manila, P. I.

With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 the region we have chosen to call trans-Missouri became a potential American frontier. Settlement began in Missouri with the opening of the nineteenth century, but it was not until after 1850 that the remainder of the region was thrown open to allow the restless flood of western-moving people to pour into Kansas, Nebraska, and Dakota. Protestantism came into the new region as a part of this vast conquest.

Even before the Louisiana Purchase, the Baptists and Methodists, already the two most effective frontier denominations, entered the country later to be known as Missouri and were soon organizing their work. With the immigration of large numbers of people during the territorial period came the Presbyterians, Disciples, and Cumberland Presbyterians. As the settlements advanced up the Missouri River and finally reached the western boundary of the newly erected state, the religious forces followed. The new communities along the Missouri River were soon served by the representatives of the several denominations. The Methodists, Baptists, and Disciples were especially successful, but the Congregationalists failed to establish their work because of the opposition provoked by their anti-slavery views.

Religious activities in Kansas and Nebraska began among the Indians in 1830. Immediately after the government's removal of the various tribes to the Indian Territory west of Missouri, denominational work was initiated. Led by the pioneer missionary, Isaac McCoy, the Baptists worked especially among the Shawnees, Delawares, Ottawas and Otoes.¹ Although the Methodists' most successful endeavors were among the Wyandottes and Shawnees, missions were also established

¹ Isaac McCoy, *The History of Baptist Indian Missions*, Washington: W. M. Morrison; New York: H. and S. Raynor, 1840, pp. 196 ff., 404 f.; *Proceedings and Reports of the American Baptist Board of Foreign Missions*, Boston, 1832-1865.

among several tribes—Kaws, Delawares, Kickapoos and Potawatomes.² The most famous of the Methodist missionaries was Thomas Johnson, the founder of the Manual Labor School at Shawnee. The work among the Osages of Grand River was begun by the Presbyterians and later taken over by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Old School Presbyterian missionary activities were directed toward aiding the Iowas, Sacs, Foxes, Otoes and Omahas.³ The American Board's principal work was confined to the Dakotas, first in Minnesota and later in the Dakota country, and to the Pawnees in Nebraska.⁴ The chief endeavors of the Friends were with the Shawnees, although a limited work was carried on among the Kaws. Under President Grant's Peace Policy the supervision of all Indian work in this region was placed under the control of the Liberal and Orthodox Quakers.⁵

The beneficial results of the Protestant Indian missions were limited, due to many difficulties: prevalence of liquor; the unsettled life and roving spirit of the Indians; the unwise governmental policy; the trading activities of the whites; and the limited number of workers.

Protestantism was established among the whites in Kansas during the period of disturbance occasioned by the political conflict over the new territory. The Methodist Episcopal Church gained an immediate advantage by its early action, while the Congregationalists profited by the early immigration of New Englanders. Other denominations were soon alive to the possibilities of this virgin field and a race for Kansas ensued. All of the larger denominations sent representatives and many of the smaller groups also entered the field. All endeavored to establish themselves in the larger towns, and a spirit of competition was everywhere manifest.

Despite the difficulties attending the border troubles, the severe life of the frontier, low moral standards, Pike's Peak fever, and the drouth of 1860, at least sixteen denominations had become established before the opening of the Civil War.

² *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society*, Topeka, 1906, IX, 180 ff.; *Minutes of the Annual Conferences*, New York, 1832-1860.

³ *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society*, X, 312 ff.; *Annual Reports of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, New York, 1838-1873.

⁴ *Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society*, Topeka, 1910, XI, 323 ff.; *The Missionary Herald*, Vols. XXXI-XLIX.

⁵ *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society*, VIII, 250 ff.; R. W. Kelsey, *Friends and the Indians*, Philadelphia, 1917, pp. 140 ff.

Since the states which furnished the greater number of settlers—Ohio, Missouri, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, New York and Iowa—were “Methodist states,” that church was able by its early start and its well functioning organization, admirably adapted to frontier needs, to surpass all other Protestant groups in numerical strength. The emigration from these states worked in an adverse manner for the Congregationalists so that they were not able to profit by their early beginning. During the early period the Baptists practically failed because of lack of support from the east and their inadequate organization. The Disciples prospered among the settlers from Missouri and also in the rural communities. Other denominations, such as the Methodist Episcopal, South, and the Old School Presbyterians, were at a disadvantage because of their supposed position on slavery.

Although Protestant groups entered eastern Iowa soon after it was legal to do so, it was not until about 1850 that any permanent work was established in western Iowa. The population of the southwestern part of the state did not increase to any great extent until Nebraska was opened for white settlement. Even after 1854 the main stream of emigrants flowed into Kansas and as a result western Iowa and eastern Nebraska were handicapped by a slow start. The denominations were soon working among the early settlers amid difficulties similar to those experienced in Kansas, and although the numerical results were not great, they were significant in proportion to the population. In Nebraska as well as Kansas the Methodists took an early lead which they never relinquished. Other denominations—Congregationalists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Lutherans—initiated several endeavors, but their work was not very extensive.

During the Civil War, not only was the flow of population to the west retarded but the receipts of the denominational boards were curtailed. The cause of these two changes, the war, also absorbed the attention of the people in these new communities and interest in the progress of religion waned. The actual war activities caused the cessation of services and the destruction of church property in Missouri, while in Kansas and Nebraska the fear of guerrilla and Indian raids created excitement not at all conducive to religious advance. The enlistment of men in the army often had a disastrous effect on the life of the small

churches which were dependent on a few people for their support. The accompanying lowering of moral standards incident to war added another responsibility to the overworked religious pioneers. Even though organized work in Missouri was stopped and little was accomplished in Nebraska, progress was made in Kansas, especially by the Disciples and Methodists. The former denomination profited by the immigration of large numbers of Missourians while the latter was able to maintain itself because of its numerical advantage at the opening of the period.

One of the chief elements in the nation's development during the Reconstruction Period was the construction of railroads, especially in the west. The most thrilling episode in this dramatic period was the building of the Union Pacific. Many other lines were built in trans-Missouri and many more projected. Railroad construction was indeed responsible for the coming of many settlers and the opening of new regions.

Following the war, all denominations renewed their activities. In Missouri reconstruction work was immediately begun, and although hindered by the loss of members and of church property, the various groups were soon serving the ever increasing population. The churches which had prospered before the war immediately regained their prominent positions, and the Congregationalists and "Northern" Methodists were able to establish church without the old-time disfavor.

In Kansas and Nebraska the horde of settlers coming in to obtain land under the conditions of the Homestead Law increased the opportunities of the churches and made possible a tremendous growth in membership. Northwestern Iowa and the new region of Dakota also profited by the great influx of settlers; the few communities formed before the war increased in size and many new settlements were established. After 1870 one of the most active of the denominational groups was the reunited Presbyterian Church. Led by Timothy Hill in Kansas and Sheldon Jackson in western Iowa and Nebraska, advances were made into hitherto neglected towns and also new settlements.⁶ The Methodists maintained their numerical leadership, but other groups were not idle. Although handicapped by a slow start, the Baptists, by tremendous strides, attained their

⁶ *Eleventh Annual Report of the Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, p. 12; R. L. Stewart, *Sheldon Jackson*, New York and Chicago, 1908, pp. 92 ff.; *Sheldon Jackson Papers*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society.

accustomed place of prominence. The Congregationalists suffered from the competition with the Presbyterians and lost their earlier lead. In Kansas and Missouri the Disciples prospered, but in the former state they were soon equalled by the revived Baptists. During the late sixties and early seventies all the larger denominations entered Dakota and began organizing activities.

To aid these struggling churches of the plains country where there was little available timber, organizations such as the Church Extension Committee, the Congregational Union, the Church Edifice Fund, and the Church Extension Society were formed to aid in the erection of churches. These organizations were a boon not only to Kansas and Nebraska but also to Missouri where reconstruction was needed due to the ravages of the war.

The history of the church in any period is a part of the history of the people which it is attempting to serve. This means that any religious organization will be affected by the social environment of which it is an integral part and will in turn help to mold that environment. Protestantism in trans-Missouri was inextricably bound up with social movements and played an important rôle.

The Indians of the United States have had few trustworthy friends. In this small group the Protestant missionaries occupy an important position. The removal of the Indians to the region west of the Missouri River by the government may have been motivated partly by the desire to get rid of them, but it is certainly true that the part played by the Baptist missionary, Isaac McCoy, came from a desire to better their condition. In the treatment of the Indians, no group was so eager for their betterment as were the devoted missionaries sent out by the various denominations. These men constantly inveighed against the corrupting influence of the whites who were eager to trade with the Indians or sell them liquor despite the government's prohibition of the latter practice. Missions were most successful when white population was far removed. The pioneer missionaries did not confine themselves, however, to polemics against the whites. Their chief contribution lay in their efforts to civilize the Indians. In these endeavors, they did not emphasize indoctrination with theological beliefs as much as they did practical education in ordinary living. Classical education occupied a minor rôle. Their first efforts were directed toward

gaining a knowledge of the language and then by means of the printing press to make the written language useable for the Indians. Realizing that the only hope for the Indians lay in their giving up their roving habits and becoming a settled people, the missionaries sought to train the Indian youth in the settled ways of life. For this reason chief emphasis was placed on work of the Manual Labor Schools. In these schools the boys were trained in the agricultural arts and the girls in household or domestic duties. The beneficial results of such labors were not always immediately evident or measurable and of course differed with the various tribes. The northern and indigenous tribes never attained the cultural level of the southern and immigrant tribes. Despite seemingly poor results, the missionaries did gain the absolute confidence of the Indians and were often the only white representatives whom they would trust. To the Indian, the missionary was a protector, an educator, a defender of moral standards, and a devoted friend in his ever changing existence.

With the creation of the Kansas and Nebraska territories, this region changed from the land of the "red-skins" to the land of the whites. Immediately following Senator Douglas' proposal that squatter sovereignty should decide whether these two territories should be free or slave, Kansas took the center of the stage. While the Kansas and Nebraska Bill was being debated in the Congress, various religious groups felt free to express themselves in no uncertain terms in opposition to the bill.⁷ When it was finally passed, the attempt to save Kansas was interpreted by many to be a religious crusade. Many of the ardent supporters of the New England Emigrant Aid Company were ministers, and a committee of ministers was tireless in its efforts to gain the support of the religious groups.⁸ The prominent leaders of the colonies sent out by the company were either ministers or churchmen. To gain support, the company stressed its moral, religious, and educational work in the territory. It is significant that Lawrence, the headquarters of the company and of the Free State party, also became the religious center of the territory, and all denominations soon established their work in this place.⁹ In the border warfare which opened

⁷ *Journal of Religion*, VII, Nos. 5-6, October, 1927, 532 ff.

⁸ *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society*, I, II, 193 ff.

⁹ *American Home Missionary Society Collection*, Chicago Theological Seminary, MS letter from S. Y. Lum, Lawrence, September 23, 1855.

shortly after the earliest settlement, there was a display of animosity and hatred which was not wholly spontaneous. To understand the border warfare it is necessary to recall the government's dealing with the Indian missions and the intense rivalry which had existed between the churches in Missouri. The Baptist, Methodist Episcopal and Quaker missionaries felt that they were discriminated against in the general administration of Indian affairs under the agent appointed by the Democratic administration. In the division of the Methodist Church in 1844, the Missouri Conference voted to become a part of the Church South. All the northern preachers did not retire from the field, however, and in 1848 the "northern" branch reorganized its work in Missouri and attempted to establish itself. The rivalry between these churches was intense and lacked any true Christian spirit.¹⁰ Since the "southern" branch had the favor of the majority of the people, it had the advantage, but the undaunted efforts of the northern brethren were a literal "thorn in the flesh." The Congregationalists, on the other hand, had absolutely failed in Missouri because of their anti-slavery position.¹¹ Both of these churches were loathed and discriminated against by the loyal Missourian. In Lawrence, these two hated denominations were strong and influential. It is not difficult to see that this already existing feeling would color the attitude of both groups and make them ready to believe all stories of malicious intentions or actions no matter how exaggerated.

Ministers were quite outspoken in their denunciation of slavery and the "slavocrats" and suffered accordingly at the hands of the Missourians. The well-known case is that of Pardee Butler, a Disciples minister, who unwisely provoked the "border ruffians" in Atchison and was first sent down the Missouri River on a raft, then later, tarred and "cottoned."¹²

The opening of the war only intensified the already existing difficulties. Both northern and southern ministers in Missouri were persecuted by the opposing side when in control. The Congregationalists and Methodists in Kansas and Nebraska supported the northern cause enthusiastically.¹³ Not only in-

10 W. W. Sweet, *The Methodist Episcopal Church and the Civil War*, Cincinnati, 1912, p. 158.

11 *The Home Missionary*, 1856, pp. 42 ff.

12 Pardee Butler, *Personal Recollections*, Cincinnati, 1889, pp. 66f., 106 ff.

13 *American Home Missionary Society Collection*, MS letter from S. D. Storrs, Atchison, October 15, 1864; *Central Christian Advocate*, May 22, 1861; David Marquette, *History of Nebraska Methodism*, Cincinnati, 1904, p. 122.

dividual men, but the conferences of the latter denomination joined in supporting the "cause that is just." The Congregational ministers, although lamenting the effects of the war on religion, still felt that it was a necessary evil and that the "cancer of slavery" should be removed as soon as possible. The Disciples remained neutral, since many of their adherents were southerners, but the effectiveness of the work of Pardee Butler, an anti-slavery advocate, shows that they were far from being southern sympathizers. During the days of the War, a settler's church affiliation often was an identifying mark of his position between the north and south. If he were a "Southern Methodist" he was suspected of being friendly with the south; if a Disciple, there was some suspicion, but he was usually thought to be neutral; but if he were Methodist Episcopal or Congregational, there was no doubt about his sympathies with the north. The people of the two latter churches, practically all from northern states, would not tolerate anything which savored of the south.

Economically the churches were an important factor in the life of early trans-Missouri. In any new town enterprise the church was always thought necessary. Although the various denominations made great efforts to bring the gospel to all places, the few larger towns received the services of several groups while the smaller towns often had no minister. The churches on the trans-Missouri frontier received aid from all classes of people. Many of course supported the religious organizations because they appreciated their influence in a new community. Others aided in the establishment of a church for purely economic reasons. Any new town was a great risk for the investor. When a likely site was proposed and seemed to have possibilities, land speculators would rush in and "buy up" the corner lots and hold them for higher prices. It was found that the location of a church and a minister in the town would increase the attractiveness of the place to the home-seeking settler. This, of course, raised the selling price of all lots. Speculators were, then, more than willing to contribute to the support of the first minister and the erection of the first church.¹⁴ Much to the chagrin of the religious pioneers, the speculators made little distinction between the denominations; the name of the group made little difference. Town associations and rail-

¹⁴ *American Home Missionary Society Collection*, MS letter from R. Cordley, March 15, 1858.

roads also realized the value of religious edifices and readily donated lots for future church buildings, usually with the stipulation that they be built within a specified time. Since the first church erected in a community was usually the only one which profited by the support of those who were interested from an economic standpoint, the denominational rivalry was intensified by the race to be the first. Not only was church building resorted to as a means of building a new town, but it was also a device to keep the town alive.¹⁵ In addition to enhancing the town's reputation, the erection of a church made for the appearance of prosperity.

In this early speculation ministers were often involved. Few of these religious pioneers ever received much financial remuneration and it was, therefore, difficult for them to overlook the numerous opportunities to make money through land speculation. Among the Methodist Episcopal ministers in Kansas, the practice seems to have been present to some extent, for the Conference thought it necessary to pass a resolution against the evil.¹⁶ It is probable that some ministers in all denominations participated, or at least tasted of the "forbidden fruit."¹⁷

Moral conditions on any frontier are low. The absence of the restraining and stabilizing influence of the organized community, combined with primitive living conditions amid the insecure and ever-changing life, tend to promote low moral standards. Trans-Missouri did not escape such a period. Intemperance, gambling, profanity, "Sabbath breaking" and indifference to religion were in evidence in most towns, and especially in those on the river. There is a difference, however, in the way in which this frontier regarded such evils. On the earlier frontier, west of the Alleghanies, the churches became the moral courts and thus regulated the life of the community. In Kansas and Nebraska, some of the early communities took action to rid themselves of the evil of intemperance, and even took the fight to the legislative halls of the territories. The first Nebraska territorial legislature, which met in the winter of 1854-1855, passed a prohibitory liquor law. Only four members of both houses of the legislature voted against this bill presented by Taylor G. Goodwill, a loyal supporter of the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, MS letter from J. C. Merrill, Topeka, November, 1870.

¹⁶ *Minutes of the Kansas and Nebraska Conference*, 1860, p. 23.

¹⁷ *American Home Missionary Society Collection*, MS letter from R. Cordley, Lawrence, March 15, 1858.

Methodist Episcopal church in Omaha.¹⁸ Although the bill was repealed three years later, a license law was substituted for it.

In regard to prohibition, no state in the United States has as well-known a position as has Kansas. The background for its reputation is found in its earliest history. At its session in 1855, the territorial legislature of Kansas passed "An act to restrain dramshops and taverns, and to regulate the sale of intoxicating liquors," which provided that each township should vote biennially to decide whether or not licenses should be issued to dramshops and taverns.¹⁹ Four years later cities of over 1,000 inhabitants were exempted from this provision and were allowed to provide their own regulations. In 1867, however, an act was passed which provided that no license could be issued to any dramshop or tavern unless the majority of the residents in the township or ward of the city signed a petition recommending such action. Except for the exemptions made for cities in 1868, the statute remained unchanged until 1880 when the Constitutional Prohibitory amendment was passed.²⁰ The above regulations seem incongruous for the frontier and are difficult to understand unless the influence of the Protestant denominations is taken into consideration.²¹ Individual ministers supported by the state, conference, and synodical groups of the various denominations took a very definite stand on the matter of intemperance and were indefatigable in their efforts to root out the evil. In the temperance societies organized and in the promotion of temperance meetings, the preachers were the guiding spirits. It was undoubtedly due to the influence of the religious groups that several towns incorporated stringent license laws in their charters, while the religious center of Kansas, Lawrence, prohibited the sale of liquor within the city limits.²² The evils mentioned above were heartily condemned, as were horse-racing, card-playing, tobacco, dancing, and baseball clubs, but the campaign against these was not as successful as that against intemperance. The high moral standards prevalent in Kansas and Nebraska had their genesis in the unflagging efforts of the religious pioneers.

18 J. S. Morton and Albert Watkins, *Illustrated History of Nebraska*, Lincoln, 1907, I, 224 f.

19 A. T. Andreas, *History of Kansas*, Chicago, 1883, pp. 287 ff.

20 *Ibid.*

21 W. E. Connelley, *A Standard History of Kansas and Kansans*, Chicago and New York, 1918, II.

22 Andreas, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

Trans-Missouri owes a great debt to Protestantism for its present educational facilities. Education's best friend was the minister and the various denominations assumed the responsibility of furnishing colleges and universities. Before the Civil War several denominational groups boasted of schools in Missouri but few of them were strongly established when hostilities broke out. During the war the schools of course were closed and many of the buildings were destroyed or used for army purposes. A great educational advance followed the close of the conflict. Several denominations—Baptist, Methodist Episcopal South, Methodist Episcopal, Disciples, Congregational, and Presbyterian—founded schools, but the Baptists were particularly active.

In Kansas, little time elapsed between the first settlement and the opening, in 1858, of the first college, Baker University, a Methodist school. During the eight succeeding years the Presbyterians, Baptists, Congregationalists, and United Brethren established denominational colleges. Three of the present state schools of Kansas had their beginnings in denominational endeavors: Kansas State College is a successor to Bluemont College, a Methodist school;²³ Kansas University was established on the foundations laid by the Protestant Episcopal and Presbyterian churches in Lawrence;²⁴ and the State Teachers College at Emporia owes a great debt to the early efforts of G. C. Morse, a Congregational missionary.²⁵ The church also furnished two of the earliest state superintendents of education—Isaac T. Goodnow, a Methodist minister, and Peter McVicar, a Congregational minister.

Since Nebraska did not receive its greatest influx of home-seekers until after the Civil War, the growth of her educational institutions began at a later period than in her sister state, Kansas. From the very beginning, however, various denominations dreamed of and made attempts at founding schools, though it was not until after 1880 that it was possible to do any significant work. The most active of the denominations were the Methodist and the Congregational.

The high educational ideals which now pervade trans-Missouri are without doubt the result of the activities, self-

²³ *Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society*, VII, 168 ff.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, VI, 70 ff.

²⁵ Connelley, *op. cit.*, II, 1015 ff.

sacrifice, and visions of the early Protestant churchmen who continued to dream of the future despite the seemingly insurmountable barriers incident to the early frontier.

Anyone familiar with life in a small community at the present time knows the important place which the church holds in the life of the people. Such a person can appreciate to some extent the even greater rôle played by the church on the frontier. Frontier life is a lonely existence and was for many quite a change from the communities from which the settlers of trans-Missouri had emigrated. The Sunday service therefore served not only as a means of divine worship but as an occasion for meeting one's neighbors. Here the men discussed their common problems, national affairs, the events of the past week and found sympathetic ears for their discouragements; for the women it was the occasion for discussion of household problems; and for the youth it was the only opportunity for meeting other young people. Since some of the members lived far away, all day meetings were often held which consisted of two or three services, "basket-dinners," and a day of fellowship. Annual camp meetings became popular because of the need for a means of social fellowship. It was an occasion which people looked forward to during the year for there they could renew old friendships and meet new settlers from "back east." The church service came as a relief from the past week's work, while the camp meeting usually came after the strenuous labors of the summer. The service itself often served as an important link for the homesick settler, since it was the only element not wholly new. Although divine worship was often necessarily informal, yet it was similar to that "back home"; the same hymns, order of worship and forms were used. Since the church was the center of the life of its members it was therefore cherished.

On this frontier where political questions were constantly demanding consideration, where the satisfaction of even simple economic needs was nearly impossible, and where moral standards were easily lowered, only a vital religion could maintain itself. That the various denominations supplied that need is attested by their growth and their consequent influence in the lives of the people. In the life of these early settlements the preacher, as a part of the community, had a fundamental task to perform. To combat discouragements, failure, privations and loneliness he attempted to bring joy, hope, and en-

couragement by giving his fellow-pioneers a new attitude and outlook on life. Amid the precarious and constantly changing scene, the Protestant minister attempted to turn the thoughts of the sturdy pioneers toward that which is eternal and changeless.

